



Is COVID-19 a Blessing in Disguise for Baseball?

There is no doubt the COVID-19 pandemic is horrendous! This is possibly the most globally destructive happening that has taken place in anyone's lifetime. Prayers to the world, and especially to anyone combatting this disease and their families and friends.

That said... the COVID-19 pandemic is a blessing for baseball. Yes, you read that correctly – a blessing.

Hear me out on this.

Baseball is dying. Too blunt? Possibly for the baseball purists who hang onto the history and mystique that once proclaimed baseball as "America's Game." Yet, ever since the nation glued itself to NFL games on Sundays from September through the first weekend of February, baseball has consistently dwindled in the minds of sports fans. Why?

#1 Baseball is boring

According to Baseball Reference, an average nine-inning game lasted one hour 55 minutes in 1946. In 2019 the average nine-inning game dragged on for three hours and 10 minutes – a 65-percent increase. Before you scream at your screen that an average football game is the same length (acknowledging commercial timeouts and replays are significant reasons for this problem), consider these fixable causes of endless baseball games:

- *Pitcher's mound chat sessions* – catchers, coaches, managers, and sometimes the third baseman, enjoy visiting the pitcher. Is this all necessary? The pitcher knows the deal. He knows the batter slammed a 500-foot grand slam his prior at-bat. He knows he walked the last four batters and can see two pitchers warming up in the bullpen. He knows the catcher's signals (which the opponent is stealing, but that is another story). He does not need a pep talk, a lecture, comforting, or the latest gossip.
 - Solution -- Ban pitching mound visits. When it is time for a reliever, call time out and replace the pitcher. Let him walk off the mound by himself. He is a big boy.
- *Rain delays* – These are grown men, right? They played in the rain as a six-year-old; they can play in the rain as an adult. If the rain becomes too much, and the game has gone past five innings, end the game. The fans have already departed, and the few TV viewers do not want to see another replay of the 1986 Mets during the rain delay (although I admit, I can re-watch the Mookie-Buckner play any day).

- Solution -- Just pull the plug on the rainy game, preventing injuries as well.
- *Umpire feuds* – What is this, hockey (again – a good topic for another blog)?
 - Solution – Grow up, guys. Let the umpire review the replay and decide. But make it quick, please!
- *Batter timeouts* – After twirling and tapping his bat, spitting a half-dozen times, and adjusting his privates, the batter holds out his palm to the umpire and steps out of the box. More spitting, dirt-kicking, bat tapping and spinning... zzzzz.
 - Solution – No batter timeouts allowed. If the batter steps out, the pitcher may lob one over the plate for an easy strike. If he needs to pick up the third base coach's sign, he can do so before he steps to the plate or immediately after the pitch.
- Conversely, *pitcher time limits* – The hurler shakes off nine catcher signals, digs into the rubber, glances over to the runner on first base five times, and then the catcher calls time out and jogs to the mound for another chit-chat. More zzzzz.
 - Solution – Enforce a real pitcher time limit: 20 seconds after the ball is returned to the pitcher, or it is a ball.
- *Foul balls* – In the beginning of baseball, a foul ball after two strikes was a third strike. Nowadays, batters battle pitchers for 10, 15, 20 pitches, tapping a ball foul to extend his at-bat. Endless zzzzz.
 - Solution – Give the batter two free foul balls. The third foul on two strikes is strike three. Sit down, batter. Sure, this pads the pitcher's K total, maybe necessitating an asterisk for some strikeout records, but for the sake of improving the game, it is a good idea.
- *Ball and strike calls* – The strike zone is already superimposed on the TV screen, indicating the exact location of the pitch. If you want to eliminate the human error or biased umpire syndrome (everyone knows Greg Maddox got every close strike call), then automate the process. Ooo, the human element is part of the game's mystique, purists proclaim. What about check-swings? Same thing. The TV camera has a better angle than the first- or third-base umpire. Bad ball/strike calls are time wasters: batters leering at the ump, managers yelling from the dugout, umpires warning the manager, catchers requesting a check-swing review. Snore!
 - Solution -- Position a ball/strike umpire in the booth, who watches a monitor and calls the pitch. There is a back-up ump at every game, so might as well give him some work.

#2 Baseball is now a regional sport

According to the New York Times, baseball attendance has eroded by 14.375-percent from 2007 to 2019 (80 million to 68.5 million). What is happening?

Many MLB teams own at last part of the local cable network that televises their games. This bodes well for the team, reflected in many local TV ratings. However, while there are still rabid fans of their local team, there are few national stars who can draw a crowd to road games. Even one of baseball's biggest stars, Mike Trout of the Los Angeles Angels, has low brand appeal outside the So Cal market. Compare this to the NFL or the NBA, where many top names and teams attract fans nationwide, no matter where they play. Think about it – are Dallas fans going to come out to a game to root or Trout? Yet, take the Chiefs' Patrick Mahomes, or even Tua Tagovailoa (who has yet to play a snap in the NFL): football studs attract fans from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans.

Besides the possible national love/hate relationship with the Yankees, there are no baseball teams that generate any nationwide buzz (except for the Astros, due to their recent cheating exploits). We can all reel off a handful of NFL teams that most American sports fans either love or detest (the Patriots and Cowboys come to mind quickly). Bandwagon fans flip-flop to the hot team of the year, thanks in large part to nationwide exposure.

#3 Weak national TV deals

The National Football League has its own successful network – the NFL Network. Skeptics thought this experiment would fail, but the country's hunger for football 12 months out of the year has proven insatiable. While attendance took a bit of a hit after the national anthem kneeling scandal, football's ratings and popularity remain robust, with games now crossing oceans and national borders, being played in England and Mexico. In fact, despite a steady stream of scandals (kneeling, concussions, cheating), the NFL flicks off bad news like a gnat. Baseball needs to face facts – the NFL has completely clobbered MLB in the marketing game. Sure, football is a better fit for television. It is a livelier, more action-packed. Despite the concussion and injury issues, it is a much more physically exciting sport. So, while it is enjoyable to relax at a ballpark with a beer and hot dog, the emotional connection to football far outweighs that of baseball. Thus, the national TV networks pump billions into contracts to air NFL games, resulting in massive ratings and revenue. Meanwhile, the ESPN, Fox, the MLB Network and TBS baseball broadcasting deals include a sprinkling of games throughout the year. The baseball lineup is buried in their scheduling and the ratings are miniscule compared with football's draw.

#4 Baseball never recovered from steroids scandal

Thank you, Barry Bonds!

(That was sarcasm.)

Other sports have had their share of steroid problems, but baseball's PED scandals that ignited with Barry Bonds in the 90s crushed public opinion of the sport. And it has not recovered.

Baseball, you see, is all about statistics. Baseball fans know exactly what the numbers "714" or "7 no-hitters" or "20 Ks" mean. Stats are somewhat insignificant in football. Quick – what does 18,355 mean? It is the all-time rushing yardage record held by Emmitt Smith. What about 77,416? That is the all-time passing yardage record, currently held by Drew Brees. Yet, thanks to rule changes and constant enhancements to the passing game, it is very likely someone shatters Brees' record in the not-so-distant future. Football cares more about continually improving the game for the fans, instead of stressing about a statistic.

Steroids killed baseball's cherished record book.

Does anyone care that Bonds slugged 73 homers in a season? Nope! He did it while on the juice. Bonds was a slam-dunk Hall of Famer when he decided to become a PED-dispenser, as was Roger Clemens and Alex Rodriguez. The lengthy list of star players who were caught was – and still is – a massive embarrassment for baseball: Manny Ramirez, Miguel Tejada, Dee Gordon, Robinson Cano, Rafael Palmeiro, Mark McGuire, Sammy Sosa. And some of these suspensions have taken place over the past year.

Football constantly evolves, and no one frets about it. Yet, the thought of tweaking the game of baseball gets rejected faster than a Jordan Hicks fastball.

Baseball and COVID?

Baseball – like the rest of the world – it is taking a break. The novel coronavirus has forced the shuttering of the 2020 baseball season. COVID-19 is forcing everyone to rethink and adjust our personal and professional routines, near- and long-term.

During this downtime, baseball should look inwardly and spend the necessary time to regroup, restructure, remarket. Consider the suggestions posed in this blog. Consider anything. Throw all the ideas against a giant whiteboard and see what sticks. Conduct some high-level Zoom meetings during the break and map out a plan for the “new-and-improved baseball.” The glass-half-full thinkers believe COVID results in positive improvements for our health-related routines, work habits and public gatherings. Let us hope baseball emerges from this virus-imposed timeout with a fresh new plan that sparks renewed enthusiasm in what once was “America’s Game.”

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